

**Resource Topics for Parklands**  
**National Park Service**  
**U.S. Department of the Interior**

**Criteria for Parklands**

Throughout the Nation, people are working to conserve natural resources, protect historic sites, and to provide recreational opportunities for a growing population. Many communities also are looking for ways to combine conservation with efforts to attract visitors who will help support the local economy. The National Park Service is responsible for carefully screening proposals for new park units to assure that only the most outstanding resources are added to the National Park System. Regardless of economic considerations or other factors, a new national park area must meet criteria for national significance, suitability, and feasibility. Various other management options are also weighed. For those with proposals for consideration, this page explains the criteria applied by the National Park Service in evaluating new park proposals, outlines the study process, and lists some of the other ways to recognize and protect important resources outside of the National Park System.

**Qualifications**

How are national parks created? What qualities make an area eligible to be a national monument, historic site, recreation area, or other units of the National Park System? These questions are frequently asked by people throughout the country. Some people think a scenic part of their community deserves to be a national park. Others want national recognition for their favorite historic house or geological formation. These sites may deserve to be protected, but how do we decide if action should be taken at the state or local level instead of by the federal government, and if federal action is appropriate what agency should take the lead?

The National Park Service has established criteria for national significance, suitability, feasibility, and management alternatives that help answer these questions. This page presents the criteria and the study process established by Congress and in the National Park Service's Management Policies. People with suggestions for new parks can use these criteria as a yardstick to see if their proposals are likely to merit further consideration.

Units of the National Park System are managed under mandates differing from those guiding many other Federal, State, and local agencies. The National Park Service is responsible for managing areas to provide for public enjoyment in such a way that will leave resources "unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations". Since 1872 the National Park System has grown to include almost 400 areas. However, the areas managed by the National Park Service are a small part of the broader system for protecting important places. Addition to the National Park Service is only one of many alternatives, and the National Park Service also operates several programs that help others preserve natural, cultural, and recreational areas outside of the System.

The System continues to evolve, reflecting the progression of history, new understandings of natural systems, and changes in patterns of recreation. Proposals for additions to the National Park System may come from the public, state, and local officials, Indian tribes, members of Congress, or the

National Park Service. To be eligible for favorable consideration as a unit of the National Park System, an area must possess nationally significant natural, cultural, or recreational resources; be a suitable and feasible addition to the system; and require direct NPS management instead of protection by some other governmental agency or by the private sector.

### **National Significance**

A proposed unit will be considered nationally significant if it meets all four of the following standards:

- it is an outstanding example of a particular type of resource.
- it possesses exceptional value of quality illustrating or interpreting the natural or cultural themes of our Nation's heritage.
- it offers superlative opportunities for recreation for public use and enjoyment, or for scientific study.
- it retains a high degree of integrity as a true, accurate, and relatively unspoiled example of the resource.

### **Resource Evaluation**

The following examples of natural and cultural resources are considered in evaluating the significance of a proposal for addition to the National Park System.

Natural Area examples may include:

- an outstanding site that illustrates the characteristics of a landform or biotic area that is still widespread;
- a rare remnant natural landscape or biotic area of a type that was once widespread but is now vanishing due to human settlement and development;
- a landform or biotic area that has always been extremely uncommon in the region or Nation;
- a site that possesses exceptional diversity of ecological components (species, communities, or habitats) or geological features (landforms, observable manifestations of geologic processes);
- a site that contains biotic species or communities whose natural distribution at that location makes them unusual (for example, a relatively large population at the limit of its range or an isolated population);
- a site that harbors a concentrated population of a rare plant or animal species, particularly one officially recognized as threatened or endangered;
- a critical refuge that is necessary for the continued survival of a species;
- a site that contains rare or unusually abundant fossil deposits;
- an area that has outstanding scenic qualities such as dramatic topographic features, unusual contrasts in landforms or vegetation, spectacular vistas, or other special landscape features;
- a site that is an invaluable ecological or geological benchmark due to an extensive and long-term record of research and scientific discovery.

Cultural Areas may be districts, sites, structures, or objects that possess exceptional value or quality in illustrating or interpreting our heritage and that possess a high degree of integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association.

Specific examples include:

- a resource that is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to and are identified with, or that outstandingly represent the broad national patterns of United States history and from which an understanding and appreciation of those patterns may be gained;
- a resource that is importantly associated with the lives of persons nationally significant in the history of the United States;
- a resource that embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type specimen, exceptionally valuable for study of a period, style, or method of construction, or represents a significant, distinctive and exceptional entity whose components may lack individual distinction;
- a resource that is composed of integral parts of the environment not sufficiently significant by reason of historical association or artistic merit to warrant individual recognition but collectively composes an entity of exceptional historical or artistic significance, or outstandingly commemorates or illustrates a way of life or culture;
- a resource that has yielded or may be likely to yield information of major scientific importance by revealing new cultures, or by shedding light upon periods of occupation over large areas of the United States.

Ordinarily cemeteries, birthplaces, graves of historical figures, properties owned by religious institutions or used for religious purposes, structures that have been moved from their original locations, and reconstructed historic buildings and properties that have achieved significance within the past 50 years are not considered to be appropriate as additions to the National Park System unless they have transcendent importance, unless they possess inherent architectural or artistic significance, or unless no other site associated with that theme remains.

Many units of the national park system have been established to recognize their important role in providing recreational opportunities. The potential for public use and enjoyment is an important consideration in evaluating potential new additions to the National Park System. However, recreational values are not evaluated independently from the natural and cultural resources that provide the settings for recreational activities.

### **Suitability and Feasibility**

An area that is nationally significant also must meet criteria for suitability and feasibility to qualify as a potential addition to the National Park System. To be suitable for inclusion in the System an area must represent a natural or cultural theme or type of recreational resource that is not already adequately represented in the National Park System or is not comparably represented and protected for public enjoyment by another land-managing entity. Adequacy of representation is determined on a case-by-case basis by comparing the proposed area to other units in the National Park System for differences or similarities in the character, quality, quantity, or combination of resources, and opportunities for public enjoyment.

To be feasible as a new unit of the National Park System an area's natural systems and/or historic settings must be of sufficient size and appropriate configuration to ensure long-term protection of the resources and to accommodate public use. It must have potential for efficient administration at a

reasonable cost. Important feasibility factors include landownership, acquisition costs, access, threats to the resource, and staff or development requirements.

### **Management Options**

Alternatives to National Park Service management might adequately protect resources even if they are significant, suitable, and feasible additions to the System. Studies of potential new park units evaluate management alternatives that may include continued management by state or local governments, Indian tribes, the private sector, or other federal agencies; technical or financial assistance from established programs or special projects; management by others as a designated national natural landmark, a national historic landmark, a national wild and scenic river, a national trail, a biosphere reserve, a state or local park, or some other specially designated and protected area. Alternatives involving other federal agencies include designation of federal lands as wilderness, areas of critical environmental concern, national conservation areas, national recreation areas, marine or estuarine sanctuaries, and national wildlife refuges. Some areas have been recognized by Congress as being affiliated with the National Park System and are managed by others under terms of a cooperative agreement with the National Park Service, but are not “units” of the system. Additions to the National Park System will not usually be recommended if another arrangement can provide adequate protection and opportunity for public enjoyment.

### **Procedures**

Areas are usually added to the National Park System by an act of Congress. However, before Congress decides about creating a new park it needs information about the quality of the resource and whether it meets established criteria. The National Park Service answers such questions by conducting studies that gather basic data about an area to determine its level of significance. If an area meets the standards of national significance, additional information is gathered about its suitability and feasibility as a park unit and alternatives for management and protection. If an area does not meet the standards of national significance, the National Park Service will suggest other appropriate state, local, or private actions. The following summary outlines basic steps in the study process, including opportunities for public involvement, the role of Congress in setting park boundaries and deciding what uses will be allowed in a new park, and other special designations that may be available for resources of state, local, or national significance.

### **Study Process**

Criteria for parklands are applied by the professional staff of the National Park Service. The first step is usually a reconnaissance survey to collect basic information about a proposal and assess the resource's significance. If the area appears to have some potential as a unit of the National Park System, Congress will be asked to authorize a detailed study of management options.

The 1998, National Parks Omnibus Management Act established a new process for identifying and authorizing studies of new units. The National Park Service periodically sends a list of study candidates to Congress. Individual members of Congress propose study authorizations, and Congress decides which studies should be conducted. The National Park Service can collect some

basic information to determine if an area is a good candidate for study, before a complete study for inclusion in the National Park System is initiated it must be authorized by a specific act of Congress.

Studies are conducted in consultation with other interested federal, state, and local agencies, Indian tribes, and the public. The format for public involvement is determined by the study team considering the type of resource and level of interest in the proposal. The public may be invited to participate through informal contacts, workshops, meetings, and opportunities to review draft documents. At least one public meeting in the vicinity of the study area is required.

### **Boundaries**

Studies of potential new park units discuss various boundary configurations. Selection of a park boundary is often a compromise between the ideal and what is practical considering costs and other factors. The National Park Service also considers the need for boundary adjustments as part of the planning process for existing units of the National Park System. The National Park Service has broad authority to study potential adjustments in the boundaries of existing parks and does not need specific authority from Congress to evaluate boundary adjustments.

Boundary studies are often similar to studies of potential new parks but apply somewhat different criteria. Boundary revisions may be recommended to include significant features or opportunities for public enjoyment related to the purposes of the park, to address operational and management issues such as access and boundary identification along topographic or natural features or roads, or to protect park resources critical to the park's purposes. Boundary studies discuss management options and whether lands will be feasible to administer considering size, configuration, ownership, costs, and other factors.

A boundary study is usually appropriate only when the resources being considered are directly related to the purposes of an existing unit of the National Park System. Even if a resource is adjacent to an existing unit, it might be considered as a “new area” study if it is not directly related to the purpose and significance of the existing unit. For example, evaluating a prehistoric archeological site next to a civil war battlefield would most likely involve the “new area” criteria rather than the boundary adjustment study process.

### **Authorizations**

Congress decides if an area should be added to the National Park System or if some other action might be appropriate. Congressional committees usually hold hearings on proposed additions to the System and ask the Secretary of the Interior for recommendations. Studies by the National Park Service provide information to help the Secretary develop a position and to help Congress decide what action to take. Study reports prepared by the National Park Service, however, present information about the resources and what management alternatives are most efficient or effective. Recommendations are usually provided in the letter transmitting the study to Congress. Legislation authorizing a new area will explain the purpose of the area and outline any specific directions for additional planning, land acquisition, management, and operations.

Congress has used more than 20 different designations in adding areas to the National Park System. These titles are usually descriptive: seashore, lakeshore, historic site, battlefield, and recreation area,

for example. The designations have not always been used consistently, but they reflect certain precedents that have been followed by Congress. The title of national park has traditionally been reserved for the most spectacular natural areas with a wide variety of features. Hunting, mining, and other consumptive uses such as grazing are generally prohibited in National Parks. National Monuments are usually smaller areas established primarily to protect historic, scientific, or natural features containing fewer diverse resources or attractions than national parks. Legislation authorizing National Preserves, Recreation Areas, Seashores, and Lakeshores sometimes allows for a wider range of activities such as oil and gas development, grazing, and hunting subject to certain limits. Despite these differences, all units of the National Park System are managed so as to "leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations".

### **Assistance and Evaluation**

Besides running the National Park System, the National Park Service also manages or participates in several programs that offer recognition or assistance for areas that do not become units of the System. Resources that are nationally significant may be eligible for special titles or designations while they continue to be managed by states, local governments, other federal agencies, or private owners. Resources of state or local significance also may benefit from technical or financial assistance programs. Some titles, distinctions, and funding sources require action by Congress while others can be provided without site-specific legislation.

Cultural resources of State, local, or national significance may be listed by the National Park Service in the National Register of Historic Places as being worthy of preservation and special consideration in planning for Federal projects. Nationally significant places may be designated National Natural Landmarks or National Historic Landmarks by the Secretary of the Interior. Congress may also authorize financial or technical assistance for nationally significant areas that are affiliated with the National Park System but remain under private, state, or local jurisdiction subject to National Park Service oversight. Resources with international importance may be designated as a world heritage site or biosphere reserve. Rivers may be designated by Congress or the Secretary of the Interior as components of the wild and scenic rivers system. Trails on Federal, State, local or private lands may be designated as national recreation trails by the Secretary of the Interior. Trails meeting standards for scenic and historic quality may be designated by Congress as National Scenic Trails or National Historic Trails.

State and local governments may apply for grants through the National Park Service to support historic preservation and acquisition or development of recreational facilities when funds are available.

The National Park Service can provide technical assistance to State and local governments in conservation of rivers, trails, natural areas, and cultural resources. Other partnerships may be established involving recognition, technical assistance, and coordination with the National Park Service for special resources and programs that are not necessarily of national significance. National Heritage Areas and Corridors are other examples of Congressional recognition that does not involve creating a new unit of the National Park System, and where the role of the National Park Service is primarily to assist State and local initiatives to preserve resources.

**Further Information**

Questions about the criteria and the study process not answered by this information should be directed to:

**Division of Park Planning and Special Studies**

National Park Service -2510  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street N.W.  
Washington, DC 20240

Inquiries about specific sites or proposals should be directed to the appropriate National Park Service regional office:

**Alaska Region**

National Park Service  
240 West Fifth Avenue, Room 114  
Anchorage, AK 99501

**Intermountain Region**

National Park Service  
12795 West Alameda Parkway  
Denver, CO 80225  
COLORADO, MONTANA, UTAH, and WYOMING, ARIZONA, NEW MEXICO, OKLAHOMA, TEXAS

**Midwest Region**

National Park Service  
6601 Riverfront Drive  
Omaha, NE 68102  
ILLINOIS, INDIANA, IOWA, KANSAS, MICHIGAN, MINNESOTA, MISSOURI, NEBRASKA, OHIO, and WISCONSIN, NORTH DAKOTA, SOUTH DAKOTA, ARKANSAS

**National Capital Region**

National Park Service  
1100 Ohio Drive, SW  
Washington, DC 20242  
METROPOLITAN AREA OF WASHINGTON, D.C., with some units in MARYLAND, VIRGINIA, and WEST VIRGINIA

**North East Region**

National Park Service  
200 Chestnut Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19106

CONNECTICUT, MAINE, MASSACHUSETTS, NEW HAMPSHIRE, NEW JERSEY, NEW YORK, RHODE ISLAND, and VERMONT, MARYLAND, VIRGINIA, WEST VIRGINIA, DELAWARE

**Pacific West Region**

National Park Service

1111 Jackson Street

Oakland, CA 94607

IDAHO, OREGON, WASHINGTON, CALIFORNIA, NEVADA, HAWAII, and PACIFIC TERRITORIES

**Southeast Region**

National Park Service

100 Alabama Street, SE, 1924 Bldg.

Atlanta, GA 30303

ALABAMA, FLORIDA, GEORGIA, KENTUCKY, LOUISIANA, MISSISSIPPI, NORTH CAROLINA, PUERTO RICO, SOUTH CAROLINA, TENNESSEE, and the VIRGIN ISLANDS